

# *Returning to Work Following a Traumatic Event -- For Employees and Managers*

## **Overview**

Coping with grief, sadness, and fear when you return to work following a traumatic event.

- Coping with feelings of grief, stress, and fear when you return to work
- Ways to support your co-workers
- Ways to support employees if you are a manager
- Dealing with customers
- Dealing with an angry or upset customer

People across the U.S. will be feeling the emotional after-effects of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks for some time to come. In the workplace, many employees are experiencing feelings of grief, stress, and fear as they return to work. These are all normal reactions following a trauma. Below are suggestions to help you attend to your own needs and those of customers during this difficult time.

## **Coping with feelings of grief, stress, and fear when you return to work**

- *Remember that feelings of fear are normal*, especially if the traumatic event occurred in or near your workplace or directly affected your organization and the people you work with. These feelings will ease with time. Many people find that work provides support and a sense of comfort after a crisis.
- *Find a "buddy" at work so you can support one another.*
- *Don't expect too much of yourself at first.* You may feel less motivated than usual or have less energy. You may have trouble concentrating or staying focused. You may feel very emotional and cry or tear up. All of these feelings are normal and are part of the recovery process following a trauma.
- *Talk with your manager about returning to work in "steps" if going back is very painful for you.* Following a traumatic event, some people may need to return to work gradually. They may need to go in to work, walk around a bit and see people, and return the next day for part of the day. They may not be able to work a full schedule for a while.
- *Talk about your fears with friends and relatives.* The people close to you may have fears about your returning to the workplace. For example, following the September 11th tragedy, some family members may not want a loved one going back to work in a tall building, or on an airplane. It's important to talk about these fears together. Stay in touch throughout the day, if possible. And keep talking together about these concerns.
- *Bring comforting photos or other items to work.*
- *Take breaks at work.* Take a walk. Talk with a co-worker. Call a friend if your job allows you to use the phone, or call a friend or relative on your cell phone if you own one.

- *Talk with your manager if you need time alone, time off, or are having trouble coping at work.*
- *Try not to pass judgment on how your co-workers are grieving and coping.* Some people cope by returning right away to normal routines and “business as usual” while others don’t. Everyone copes in a different way and there is no “right” or “wrong” way of reacting following a traumatic event.
- *Use company resources to find help and support.* Contact the employee assistance program (EAP), the employee resource program, or your human resources (HR) department.
- *Seek help if you are experiencing post-trauma symptoms.* These include sleep disturbances, flashbacks, changes in appetite, anxiety, or depression. Contact the EAP, the employee resource program, or your health care provider.
- *Try to eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly.* Some experts even recommend that you double your normal amount of exercise following a traumatic event as a way of reducing levels of stress. For example, if you normally take a 30-minute daily walk, you might increase your walk to 60 minutes. Just be careful not to push yourself, and talk with your health care provider before starting an exercise program for the first time.
- *Remember that healing takes time.* It may take weeks or even months to adjust following a traumatic event or the loss of a co-worker.
- *Seek support from your faith community.*
- *Look at how you handled other traumatic events in your life.* Think back to what worked in the past to help comfort you now. Remind yourself of other times in your life that you have been resilient.

### **Ways to support your co-workers**

Following a traumatic event, you and your co-workers will heal more quickly if you reach out to and support one another.

- *Be available.* Let your co-workers know that you’re there to talk and listen.
- *Ask how you can help.* Volunteer to share rides to work, pitch in with a project, or run errands if a co-worker has been deeply affected by the trauma.
- *Listen to one another.*
- *Share what you know about helpful resources.* Share information you have about helpful resources offered through the company or in your community.

### **Ways to support employees if you are a manager**

The more support you are able to offer employees, the more quickly everyone in your group and organization will recover.

- *Acknowledge employees' feelings.* Let people know that you share their sense of loss. It is not a sign of weakness to express your own grief. Rather, it gives permission for employees to talk about their own pain.
- *If you see that an employee is becoming emotional, give him or her a few minutes of privacy.*
- *Expect to face many emotions.* You and your staff may have feelings that shift from one day to the next, including shock, guilt, anger, anxiety, and sadness. Remember that healing takes time and that strong feelings are a normal part of the healing process.
- *Watch for symptoms of grief.* After a death or traumatic event, employees may make more mistakes than usual, become irritable, or have trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating. These normal symptoms of grief usually pass as the grief becomes less acute. Be prepared to suggest resources such as the EAP or employee resource program if an employee seems to be having trouble coping or needs support.
- *Spend extra time with your team or staff.* The leadership presence of a caring member of management can be reassuring and can help to re-establish both normalcy and focus. Spend time listening. Ask how you can help. Suggest resources that can help employees cope with their private grief.
- *Realize that employees may need to make or take personal calls during the day.* They may need to make calls regarding insurance claims or other post-disaster issues that need to be taken care of during business hours.
- *If an employee died, find ways to help your staff remember the person.* You might:
  - have a fund-raiser for a cause the employee or his family supported
  - encourage your staff to share their memories in a company newsletter
  - have a service or gathering at which people can remember the person who died
  - post a bulletin board tribute to the employee
  - encourage employees to attend the funeral or memorial service, if possible
- *Keep lines of communication open.* Meet with employees on a regular basis -- both individually and as a group -- to check in, update people on company initiatives regarding support and changes, and also to let employees know that you are available to talk.
- *Watch for signs that an employee is having trouble coping.* Be alert for signs that an employee may be having trouble coping, such as trouble sleeping or eating, difficulty concentrating, or frequently missing work. An employee who seems to be doing fine in the days just after a death may be too numb to feel the full effect of what happened, and may develop problems later on such as angry outbursts or signs of depression. Don't assume everything is OK because the person hasn't

asked for time off or come to you with problems. Remember to ask, “Are you OK?” “Is there anything you need?” Let the employee know that confidential help is available through the EAP or employee resource program.

- *Initially, don't be too concerned about job performance.* Employees may be less productive than they normally are following a loss or traumatic event. Some may temporarily have trouble attending to their job duties. Most people regain perspective and begin to recover in a short time.
- *Help employees to feel a sense of control over their lives.* Reactions to trauma and loss can leave people feeling powerless and vulnerable. Caring conversations about ways to regain a sense of control can be very helpful. You might have conversations about attending to the needs of family members or co-workers, identifying decisions or changes that don't have to be handled immediately, or temporarily delegating routine responsibilities.
- *Help employees feel safe.* If employees express concerns about safety or security at work, discuss ways the organization might help them to feel safer. Traumatic events often leave people feeling vulnerable and afraid. Work with upper management to respond to employees' concerns.
- *Don't forget that you may be grieving, too.* Grief is just as painful for managers as it is for employees. This is especially true when you lose a member of your team or a friend or loved one yourself. As a manager it is expected that you take care of your employees during a time of loss. Remember to take care of yourself as well. Try to eat balanced meals, get enough sleep, find time for exercise, and remember to spend time with family and friends who can give you support. Grieving is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign that you are a human being.
- *Contact the EAP, the employee resource program, or your HR department if you need support in the days and weeks ahead.*

### Dealing with customers

People react and respond to trauma in different ways. At work, some customers may be more patient and understanding following a traumatic event. Others may be more demanding. When you are recovering from grief yourself, coping with customers' needs may be especially challenging.

- *Realize that customers are under stress, too. Try to be patient.*
- *Remember to thank customers for their patience and understanding.*
- *Take a few minutes to yourself if being with customers gets to be too much.*
- *Check in with co-workers to make sure they are OK.*
- *Let your manager know if there are resources you need to make your job easier.*

### Dealing with an angry or upset customer

Following a traumatic event, you may find yourself having to deal with angry or upset customers or other challenging situations at work. Dealing with an angry or upset person is hard even under normal circumstances. It can be especially hard when you are handling painful emotions of your own. Here are some ways to deal with an angry or upset customer:

- *Take a deep breath.* Breathe and count to five to help yourself stay calm.
- *Try not to take the person's anger personally.* Keep in mind that the customer is angry at the circumstances, not at you.
- *Let the person talk and express his frustrations.* Sometimes, that's all that is needed to calm someone down.
- *Do not interrupt.* Be patient and hear the person out.
- *Show that you are listening.* You might say, "I see" or "I understand."
- *Repeat what you have heard to show that you are listening.* You might say, "Let me repeat what I heard to see if I understood correctly," or "Let me clarify that I have all the information."
- *Do not raise your voice or argue with the person.* Speak in a calm, careful voice.
- *Maintain a respectful attitude.* Be a patient and sympathetic listener. Focus on what the person is saying. Always use titles such as "Mister" or "Ms."
- *Be sensitive to age and to cultural differences.* Do not speak rapidly to a person who is elderly or to someone whose first language is not English.
- *Apologize if the problem is the result of a service breakdown.* If the problem was caused by circumstances beyond your control, you might say, "I'm sorry this happened. We are doing our best to serve everyone's needs."
- *Propose options and solutions.* You might say, "Let's see what we can do to solve the problem." When feasible, offer multiple solutions, and allow the customer to choose.
- *Contact your supervisor or security if a customer becomes abusive or if you are worried for your safety.*
- *If you feel yourself becoming angry, seek support from your manager or supervisor.*